



# Gwent Levels

Our vision for the future



Living Levels Landscape Partnership



# Foreword

**W**elcome to the Gwent Levels, a living, working and evolving landscape next to the Severn Estuary between Cardiff and Chepstow in South Wales.

Reclaimed from the sea and shaped by humans over two millennia, the landscape is a testament to the power of human intervention, the resilience of nature and the passage of time.

Sometimes overlooked as a flat and unassuming landscape, on further inspection, the Gwent Levels are revealed to be an appealing and remarkable coastal landscape of high skies and low horizons, criss-crossed by an intricate network of narrow watercourses. The Levels represent the finest example in Wales of a reclaimed coastal landscape exploited, modified and transformed by the communities that have lived, worked and played here for the past two thousand years.

“ Even at a distance the Levels are mesmeric, beguiling beneath wide, estuary skies. They shape-shift with the weather as you walk [through] them, borrowing the magical sea-light of the Severn Estuary when it's struck by sun, or turning as dark and dramatic as a storm-tide. ”

*The Sum of a place, Julian Hoffman, 2015*

Today the Levels are a predominantly pastoral landscape that is drained and irrigated for productive farming, alongside a diverse range of semi-natural habitats for rare species. Water is ever-present in the landscape, creating fertile fields and presenting challenges to human settlement. Distinctive drainage patterns of canalised rivers, drains, reens and ditches, accentuated by lines of pollarded willows, define a planned and reclaimed landscape. A local lingo has evolved with the landscape to describe these distinctive features. Vibrant cities and towns around the edge of the Levels contrast its strong sense of tranquillity, remoteness and wildness away from human occupation.

The modern landscape – much of which lies below sea level – is only viable due to the sea wall and complex drainage system developed since the medieval period. The reens and ditches, grips, pills and gouts were created to keep the land drained, irrigated and salt-free by allowing water to find its way to the estuary by gravity; a remarkable achievement on a coast with one of the highest tidal ranges in the world. Today's 'permanent' sea wall has evolved from a succession of structures needed over time to keep back the water. The story of the Levels describes a constantly changing dynamic between the land and the water which has provided for people and animals, in different ways, since prehistoric times.

The Levels have a wealth of archaeological and heritage assets of national importance, much of which is preserved in waterlogged



**An ancient landscape**

The Caldicot Levels looking west over Redwick towards Cardiff

# A rich and diverse landscape

## Gwent Levels In numbers

**200km<sup>2</sup>** total area, including intertidal area

**8 SSSIs** covering 59km<sup>2</sup>

**1500km** of reens and ditches

**14m** tidal range, one of the World's highest

**35km** sea wall protecting the Levels

**650,000** people on or near the Levels

soils across the area, illustrating the long history of human occupation and management. Finds include Bronze Age, Roman and medieval boats, Iron Age trackways and buildings, medieval fishtraps, and the well preserved footprints of Mesolithic hunter-gathers, who roamed the coastal marshes 7000 years ago.

End to end, the network of waterways on the Levels stretches for around 1500km, providing a myriad of opportunities for different species, including *Wolffia arrhiza*, the world's smallest flowering vascular plant, grass snakes, kingfishers, water voles and otters. The assemblage of water beetles is unique in Wales and includes rarities, such as the great silver water beetle (*Hydrophilus piceus*), found nowhere else in Wales and only a few other sites in southern England.

Large numbers of birds, attracted by a rich supply of food in the wet grasslands and coastal mudflats, visit each year to nest and raise their young. In recent years, bittern have returned to breed after an absence of several hundred years and their

booming calls can be heard echoing over the reedbeds. Starling murmurations, once a common sight in many parts of the country, still provide spectacular aerial acrobatic displays in the winter skies.

The Levels are also one of a few remaining strongholds for the shrill carder bee *Bombus sylvarum* - a UK priority species.

The story of how the Levels have been created and managed is a story of engineering, ingenuity, creativity, and co-existence with nature and natural forces. Over 2000 years, the combination of local people managing a dynamic landscape, along with its associated history, vocabulary, and wildlife, makes the Gwent Levels rare, special, and a rich resource to be protected and preserved for future generations.

But human activity has also had a detrimental effect on the landscape and wildlife. Today, major development pressures from new housing, industrial and infrastructure projects, and modern farming practices are continuing to have an impact,

while the unpredictable weather patterns associated with climate change are affecting people, habitats and species.

To reverse these trends, we need to recognise that our 'natural capital' - nature's assets from which we gain benefits such as clean air, fresh water, and food - must be well-managed to prevent it becoming degraded and lost. Such loss is not only bad for biodiversity, but also affects our social and economic well-being, and our health.

The Gwent Levels has the capacity to help the region face the challenges of industrial growth, climate change, food and water security, and threats to biodiversity. It has the potential to provide vital natural resources and services to supply our ever-growing demands and populations. It can play a key role in improving the quality of life, health and well-being of local people, which will boost the economy, attract new business and tourism, and improve culture and heritage. With careful restoration and conservation, it can continue to benefit both wildlife and people, now and into the future.



**Shrill Carder bee**  
Found at less than 20 sites in UK



**Hairy Hawker dragonfly**  
260 species of wetland invertebrates recorded



**Lapwings**  
80,000 birds visit the Severn Estuary each year

Living Levels / Commissionair

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# Discovering the Gwent Levels

- 1 Parc Tredelech
- 2 Llanrumney Hall
- 3 Hendre Lake
- 4 Peterstone & Wentlooge Marshes
- 5 Tredegar House
- 6 Newport Museum
- 7 Newport Transporter Bridge
- 8 Caerleon Roman Museum
- 9 Newport Ship Museum
- 10 Great Traston Meadows
- 11 Newport Wetlands
- 12 Goldcliff
- 13 Magor Marsh
- 14 Caldicot Castle
- 15 Black Rock
- 16 Chepstow Museum & Castle



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'The Cathedral of the Moors'

St Mary's, Nash, one of 37 listed buildings on the Levels

# Landscape Partnership

Living Levels Landscape Partnership brings together like-minded stakeholders to work together to collectively recapture, enhance and celebrate the historic area for all to enjoy.

The Partnership came together in 2014 and, with funding from National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Rural Communities Development Fund, has invested £4m in the Gwent Levels.

(CCC), Gwent Archives (GA), Cardiff Story Museum, Sustrans, National Trust, Bumblebee Conservation Trust and BugLife Cymru.

The Partnership includes RSPB Cymru (lead body), Gwent Wildlife Trust (GWT), Natural Resources Wales (NRW), Newport City Council (NCC), Monmouthshire County Council (MCC), City of Cardiff Council

Living Levels covers many aspects to enhance the landscape from natural heritage restoration, improving visitor experience, and working with communities to showcase the incredible heritage this landscape has to offer.



# What we have achieved so far

## The outcomes of the programme have been considerable.

One of the main achievements has been the mass engagement with people from across the region, including residents, landowners and farmers, visitors, business owners, volunteers, and politicians with influence over important policy decisions affecting the Levels. This has created a real revival of interest and enthusiasm in the Levels.

The public engagement side of the programme has been at least as important as the ecological restoration side. The heart of Living Levels has been about reconnecting people with their history, their environment and with other people. The huge programme of events, skills training and volunteering has had overwhelmingly positive feedback, with people consistently reporting learning new things about their local area as a key reason for enjoyment.

The learning programme has sown the seeds of interest amongst young people from primary age up to tertiary. The partnership with Coleg Gwent has seen Coleg tutors embed the Gwent Levels as a study course with photography, arts and drama students. This is a departure from the typical ecology subjects, helping to reach a far broader demographic through their peer networks. A diverse range of people have also been involved in volunteering from local residents to corporate groups as well as groups with special needs.

This work is leading to an injection of passion and pride in this landscape on a significant scale. Events have frequently been sold out, there have been volunteer waiting lists, and there has been an increase in the number of visits at some key destinations. There has also been an excellent response from press and media through coverage on programmes such as BBC's Countryfile and regular appearances in local press. A Friends of the Gwent Levels campaigning group has been established, with several of their founding members being closely involved with Living Levels activities.

This work has translated into real and sustained pressure for policy change which is beginning to lead to a change in the way the Levels is being valued, managed and protected. Evidence for that change lies in recent political decisions and announcements by Welsh Government.

There are also policies being prepared that will strengthen protection for the Levels in the planning system. Although this is the collective output of a very large number of organisations and individuals, the work of the partnership has really helped to organise information and coordinate awareness-raising activity around the importance of the Levels.

Much has been achieved, but there is still more left to do to realise our goal of protecting this special landscape.

## Some key achievements:

- **26km** of open field ditches restored, allowing the recovery of aquatic plant and animal communities
- **150+** willows pollarded
- **160+** fruit trees planted and traditional orchards restored and restocked
- **27ha** of land managed for the shrill carder bee and other pollinators
- **30+** fly-tipping cases investigated, and **7** prosecutions made
- **75,000+** unique visits made to the website
- **10** gateway and visitor hubs created
- New **pre-history display** at Newport Museum and **Levels display** at Caerleon National Roman Legion Museum
- **5 'People of the landscape'** sculptures installed
- **8** walking and **4** cycling routes created
- **PROW network** upgraded and improved with new bridges, stiles and way marking
- **17** community hubs funded
- **110+** events and activities delivered with over **10,000 attendees**
- **37** history RATS volunteers recruited
- **52** oral histories recorded
- **73** schools, **1000+** primary pupils and **150+** college students reached
- Over **600** volunteers contributed **£150k** of volunteer hours



The overall aim of the Living Levels Landscape Partnership (LLLP) programme was to reconnect people and communities to their landscape and to provide a sustainable future for this historic and unique area.

The project had a total budget of £4 million over a four-year period and has delivered management and engagement projects, including habitat conservation, orchard restoration, access improvements, events and activities, and volunteer programmes. The participation of communities across the area has resulted in a revival of interest in the Levels and a reconnection of people with their environment, history, and to others within their communities.

As the project neared the end of the Lottery-funded phase, it was recognised that, although much had been achieved, there was still more to do to ensure the future of the Gwent Levels. Considerable thought was given towards how to extend the life of the project, to capitalise on extensive public interest and political support, and build on the successes already achieved.

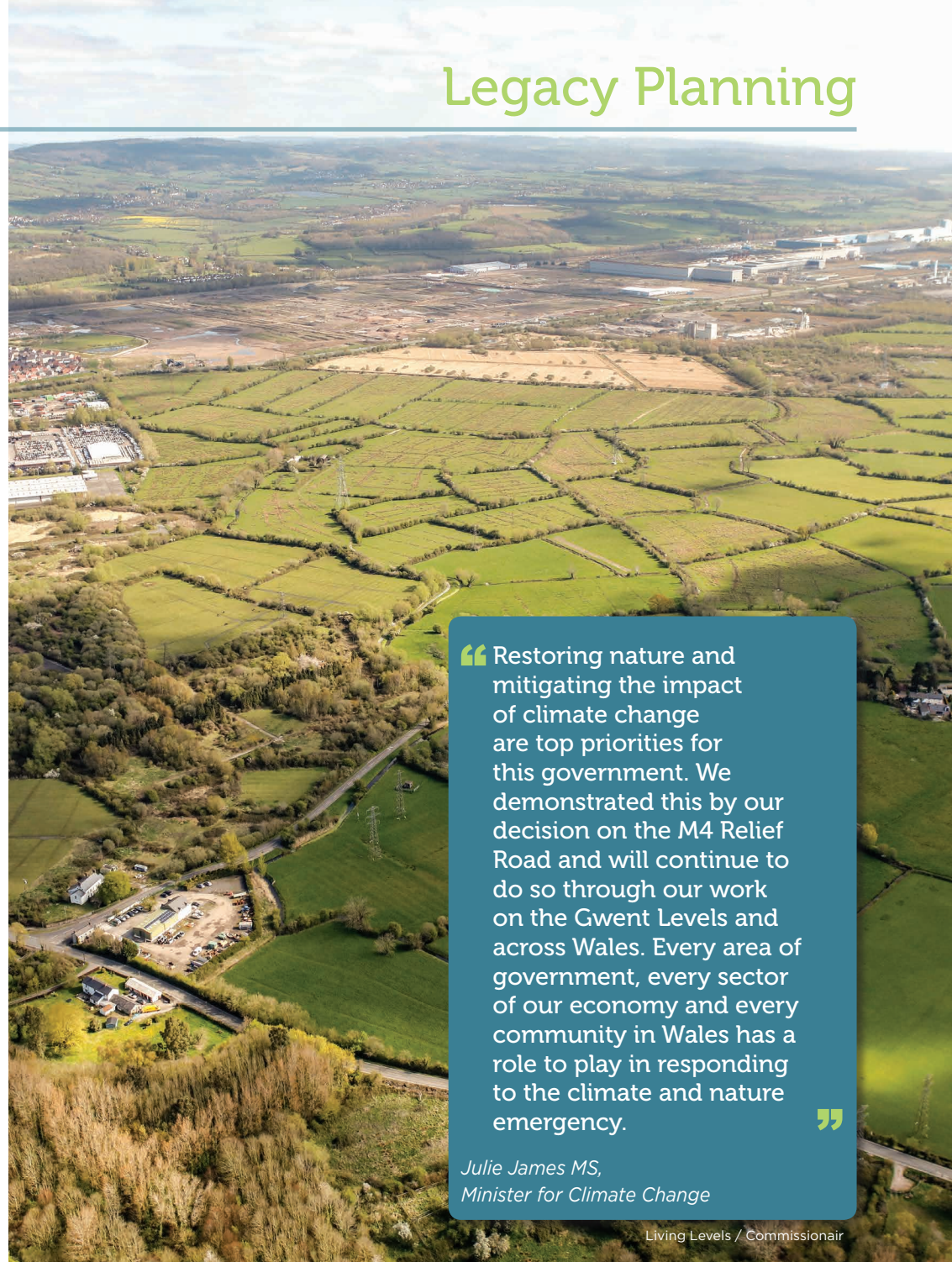
In 2019, Welsh Government convened a Gwent Levels Working Group to explore how the Levels could be better protected and managed. Key priorities identified include supporting the work of the LLLP, providing planning guidance to local authorities to help avoid unacceptable biodiversity and landscape impacts, and improving support for landowners managing SSSIs. Welsh Government, in a further recognition of the importance of the Levels, has named it as one of nine National Natural Resource Areas in Future Wales.

In 2021, LLLP commissioned a legacy plan to explore a long-term and sustainable future for the project after the initial Lottery funding came to an end in March 2022. Its aim was to find a mechanism that would build on the success of the LLLP programme and deliver long-lasting benefits for the Gwent Levels landscape, heritage and communities.

A consultation with partners and stakeholders revealed unanimous support for a continuation of the Living Levels. A considerable number of suggestions were made for work to be undertaken by a legacy programme across a broad spectrum of land management work, community engagement, volunteer development, training, interpretation and advisory work.

Support for a legacy project was demonstrated by RSPB, Newport City Council and Monmouthshire County Council, who each contributed funds to enable an 18-month transition phase. Further funding was given by NRW, and NLHF agreed to extend their support by allowing the Living Levels to access the original projects underspend.

Throughout 2022 and 2023, the Living Levels team, alongside partners and other stakeholders, will be developing a plan to ensure a long-term sustainable future for both the Living Levels and the extraordinary landscape of the Gwent Levels.



“ Restoring nature and mitigating the impact of climate change are top priorities for this government. We demonstrated this by our decision on the M4 Relief Road and will continue to do so through our work on the Gwent Levels and across Wales. Every area of government, every sector of our economy and every community in Wales has a role to play in responding to the climate and nature emergency. ”

*Julie James MS,  
Minister for Climate Change*

Living Levels / Commissionair

# A vision for the future

## Our vision

The Gwent Levels is widely recognised and celebrated as a unique place within Wales, for its abundant wildlife, intricate, hand-crafted landscape, and deep, rich history. It forms a thriving part of our natural and cultural heritage, with a powerful sense of place that enriches people's lives. The Levels is a resilient, working landscape, highly valued by residents and visitors alike, that makes a positive contribution towards combatting the effects of climate change and reversing biodiversity loss.

This vision is being led and advocated by the Living Levels Landscape Partnership. We see this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reshape the landscape and rekindle the connection between local people and the countryside.

We can achieve this by taking a landscape-scale approach to conservation. By 2030...

- The distinct identity and assets of the Gwent Levels will be highly valued by local people and visitors. The area will be accessible to all as a key tourist destination, inspiring people to care for and explore its natural, cultural and industrial heritage.
- Local people, landowners and the public, private and third sectors will be working together on a landscape scale, restoring, conserving and reconnecting the physical and cultural landscape of the Gwent Levels.
- The Gwent Levels will be an exemplar for habitat restoration and a haven for iconic species, such as otters, water voles and wetland birds.
- The natural environment of the Gwent Levels will be sustainably managed and maintained to a high quality, with multiple benefits being delivered for society including biodiversity, water quality, flood management and public health.
- Local communities in and around the Gwent Levels will be fully engaged, well skilled and have ownership of, and understanding and pride in, their environment and its rich heritage.
- The Gwent Levels will be valued strategically and recognised within national, regional and local plans.



'The Fisherman'

Sculpture celebrating traditional fisheries along the Severn Estuary, Black Rock



## Aims for the Gwent Levels and Living Levels Partnership

The Living Levels Landscape Partnership has developed a number of aims under which specific actions will be implemented to help achieve our vision:

- A** The conservation and management of the Gwent Levels are informed by **authoritative data**, gained through ongoing research and monitoring.
- B** The Gwent Levels is a **working landscape and an exemplar of landscape-scale conservation**, where management involves integrating productive farming with conserving biodiversity, recreation and historic assets, resulting in resilient ecosystems and cultural landscapes.
- C** The Gwent Levels is a **landscape where farmers and landowners are valued** both as producers of food and other public goods; and as contributors to nature recovery.
- D** The Gwent Levels is a **place where people understand and appreciate the landscape, its history and wildlife habitats**; where they can access and enjoy its nature and culture; value its benefits for better health and wellbeing; and are inspired to support its protection and management.
- E** The Gwent Levels **supports healthy, resilient ecosystems**, where local people understand the importance of preparing for and adapting to climate change and steps are taken to reduce the carbon footprint and improve carbon storage.
- F** The **economy of communities in and around the Gwent Levels is stimulated** through the development of visitor facilities and local supply chains that enhance a sense of place and keep maximum benefits of tourism within the local economy.
- G** The **historic, cultural and ecological integrity of the Gwent Levels are conserved and enhanced** through the development and application of harmonised and consistent planning and economic development policies across all local authority areas.
- H** The **momentum of the Living Levels Landscape Partnership is maintained and developed** through a legacy partnership that shares resources through coordinated action, that helps deliver corporate and shared objectives, and collectively delivers an agreed programme of actions.

C Harris



**Southern marsh orchid**  
Great Traston Meadows Nature Reserve

# Working together

By bringing organisations, businesses, landowners and communities together, we can put the Gwent Levels at the heart of the region, helping to redefine the role it plays in Wales and the UK.

Treating this unique area as a functioning, powerful and complex system of waterways, industries, habitats and communities will make it both naturally and culturally significant, providing multiple benefits for wildlife and people alike.

The LLLP intends this document to be a stepping stone in bringing our vision for the Gwent Levels to life. With input, help, information, funding and expertise from a wide range of sectors, organisations, groups and local people we can take the actions suggested under each theme forward over the coming years.

Taking the time to consult and involve people at every stage ensures that the vision and actions are reviewed and relevant. Everyone has a part to play in the transformation of the area, from businesses and farmers, to schools and volunteer groups. Participation will help to bring us together to protect this wonderful landscape and ensure it has a future going forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



C Harris

Many farmers on the Levels are acutely aware of the need to make space for wildlife



C Harris

Yellow flag iris, Parc Tredelerch



David Broadbent

Cycling on the Levels



C Harris

Kingfisher, Magor Marsh



Joke Creative

Following the Wales Coast Path



Starling murmuration, Newport Wetlands  
Thousands of starlings create an awesome display

# Ways to get involved



C Harris

Become an ambassador  
for the Gwent levels

Join in one of our  
Living Levels events

Find out more about this  
fascinating landscape

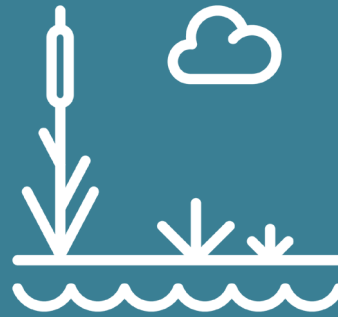
Explore the Levels  
on foot or by bike

Volunteer with us or  
one of our partners

Visit a museum or  
heritage site

Discover a wealth of  
wildlife on your doorstep

Work with us to turn  
our vision into reality



## Lefelau Byw Living Levels

### Contact Living Levels

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